

Mixed Notices May Kill 'Assassins' B'way Hopes

By GREG EVANS

NEW YORK — Long before it opened, "Assassins," Stephen Sondheim's new musical, had sold out its nine-week run at the 129-seat Playwrights Horizons Theater. But mixed notices probably have nixed a Broadway run.

No decision has been made regarding the show's life beyond Horizons, though "Assassins" generated plenty of interest from producers. Sondheim told *Daily Variety* that discussions about the next step would take place this week, and that RCA will record a cast album. The show is to close Feb. 16.

Most sources are dubious about the musical's potential for commercial success.

With music and lyrics by Sondheim, book by John Weidman and direction by Jerry Zaks, the offbeat "Assassins" tells the stories of nine presidential killers and would-be killers. John Wilkes Booth, Lynette (Squeaky) Fromme and Lee Harvey Oswald are among the characters who populate the 90-minute, intermissionless tuner.

Reviews have been mixed, with the unfavorable notices outnumbering the positive by a considerable margin. Frank Rich, chief critic for the New York Times and a Sondheim admirer, wrote that " 'Assassins' will have to fire with sharper aim and fewer blanks if it is to shoot to kill."

Several reviews questioned the wisdom of the project in the first place, and New York magazine's John Simon also attacked Sondheim and company for going ahead with the show once war in the Persian Gulf got underway. The production's only unqualified rave came from David Richards, the Times' Sunday reviewer.

"I think there's a market for it off-Broadway," says Promenade Theater owner Ben Sprecher. "I think 'Assassins' could have a life in a small theater." Sprecher lobbied Sondheim's camp heavily about moving "Assassins" to the 399-seat Promenade but decided to book another show when a decision was not forthcoming.

"I didn't want to be the mule who starved to death between two bales of hay," Sprecher said. "Breaking Up," a new play by Michael Cristofer starring Matthew Modine, has been booked into the Promenade for an open-ended run with a March opening.

Although the city's major theater-owners declined to speak for the record about possible "Assassins" negotiations, the consensus was that the unfavorable reviews have dampened enthusiasm among legit producers already skittish over the show's controversial theme.